MAGAZINE SECTION

Features

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Fiction

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# The Victory at Sea

by Admiral Sims.

## The Transatlantic Trip in Wartime

CONVOYING ships in the stormy fall and winter waters, amid the fog and rain of the eastern Atlantic, was a monotonous and dreary occupation. Only one or two incidents enlivened this particular voyage. As the Parker, Commander Halsey Powell, was scouting ahead at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, her lookout suddenly sighted a submarine bearing down upon the convoy. Immediately the news was wirelessed to every vessel.

As soon as the message was received the whole convoy, at a signal from the flagship, turned four points to the left. For nearly two hours the destroyers searched this area for the submerged submarine, but that crafty boat kept itself safely under the water and the convoy now again took up its original course. About two days' sailing brought the ships to the point at which the protecting destroyers could safely leave them to return unescorted to America; darkness had now set in, and under its cover the merchantmen slipped away from the warships and started westward. Meantime the destroyer escort had received a message from th Cumberland, the British cruiser which was acting as ocean convoy escort, to convoy "HS 14." "Convoy is six hours late," she reported, much like the announcer at a railroad station who informs the waiting crowds that the incoming train is that much overdue. According to the schedule these ships should reach the appointed rendezvous at 6 o'clock the next morning; this message evidently moved the time of arrival up to noon. The destroyers, slowing down so that they would not arrive ahead of time, started for the designated spot.

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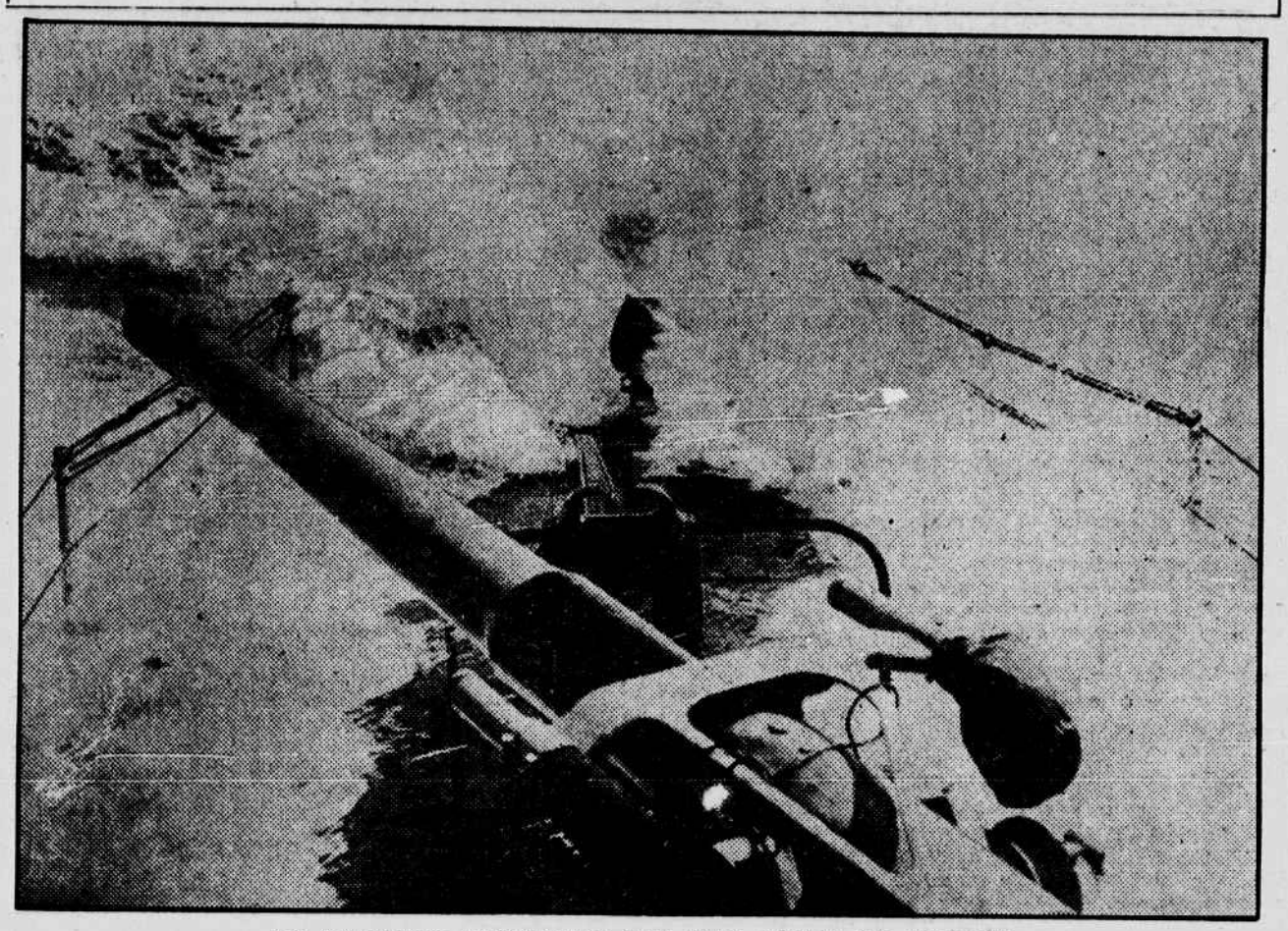
Sometimes thick weather made it impossible to fix the position by astronomical observations, and the convoy might not be at its appointed rendezvous. For this reason the destroyers now deployed on a north and south line about twenty miles long for several hours. Somewhat before the appointed time one of the destroyers sighted a faint cloud of smoke on the western horizon, and soon afterward thirty-two merchantmen, sailing in columns of fours, began to assume a definite outline. At a signal from this destroyer, the other destroyers of the escort came in at full speed and ranged themselves on either side of the convoy—a maneuver that always excited the admiration of the merchant skippers. This mighty collection of vessels, occupying about ten or twelve square miles on the ocean, maintaining its formation so skillfully, was really a beautiful and inspiring sight. When the destroyers had gained their designated positions on either side, the splendid cavalcade sailed boldly into the area which formed the favorite hunting grounds for the submarine.

As soon as the danger zone was reached the whole aggregation, destroyers and merchant ships, began to zigzag. The commodore on the flagship hoisted the signal, "Zigzag A," and instantaneously the whole thirty-two ships began to turn twenty-five degrees to the right. These ships, usually so cumbersome, made this simultaneous turn with all the deftness and even with all the grace of a school of fish into which one has suddenly cast a stone. All the way across the Atlantic they had been practicing such an evolution; most of them had already sailed through the danger zone more than once, so that the maneuver was by this time an old story.

For ten or fifteen minutes they proceeded along this course, when immediately, like one vessel, the convoy turned twenty degrees to the left, and started in a new direction. And so on for hours, now a few minutes to the right, now a few minutes to the left, and now again straight ahead, while all the time the destroyers were cutting through the water, every eye of the skilled lookouts fixed upon the surface for the first glimpse of a periscope. This zig-zagging was carried out according to comprehensive plans which enabled the convoy to zigzag for hours at a time without signals, the courses and the time on each course being designated in the particular plan ordered, all ships' clocks being set exactly alike by time signal. Probably I have made it clear why these zigzagging evolutions constituted such a positive measure. All the time the convoy was sailing in the danger zone it was assumed that a submarine was present, looking for a chance to torpedo. Even though the officers might know that there was no submarine within three hundred miles, this was never taken for granted; the discipline of the whole convoy system rested upon the theory that the submarine was there, waiting only the favorable moment to start the work of destruction.



AN AMERICAN DESTROYER OFF THE COAST OF IRELAND.

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But a submarine, as already said, could not strike without the most thorough preparation. It must get within three or four hundred yards or the torpedo would stand little chance of hitting the mark in a vital spot. The commander almost never shot blindly into the convoy, on the chance of hitting some ship; he carefully selected his victim; his calculation had to include its speed, the speed of his own boat and that of his torpedo; and, above all, he had to be sure of the direction in which his intended quarry was steaming; and in this calculation the direction of the merchantman formed perhaps the most important element. But if the ships were constantly changing their direction it is apparent that the submarine could make no calculations which would have much practical value.

LIEUT. COMMANDER (NOW CAPTAIN) A. W. JOHNSON, Commander of the Conyngham, one of the first of the American flotilla to reach European waters.

In the afternoon the Aubrietia, the British mystery ship which was sailing thirty miles ahead of the convoy, reported that she had sighted a submarine. Two or three destroyers dashed for the indicated area, searched it thoroughly, found no traces of the hidden boat, and returned to the convoy. The next morning six British destroyers and one cruiser arrived from Devonport. Up to this time the convoy had been following the great "trunk line" which led into the Channel, but it had now reached the point where the convoys split up, part going to English ports and part to French. These British destroyers had come to take over the twenty ships which were bound for their own country, while the American destroyers were assigned to escort the rest to Brest. The following conversation—typical of those that were constantly filling the air in that area—now took place between the American flagship and the British:

Conyngham to Acbates: This is the Conyngham, Commander Johnson. I would like to keep the convoy together until this evening. I will work under your orders until I leave with convoy for Brest.

Acbates to Conyngham: Please make your own arrangements for taking French convoy with you tonight.

Acbates to Conyngham: What time do you propose leaving with French convoy tonight?

Conyngham to Acbates: About 5 p.m. in order to arrive in Brest tonight.

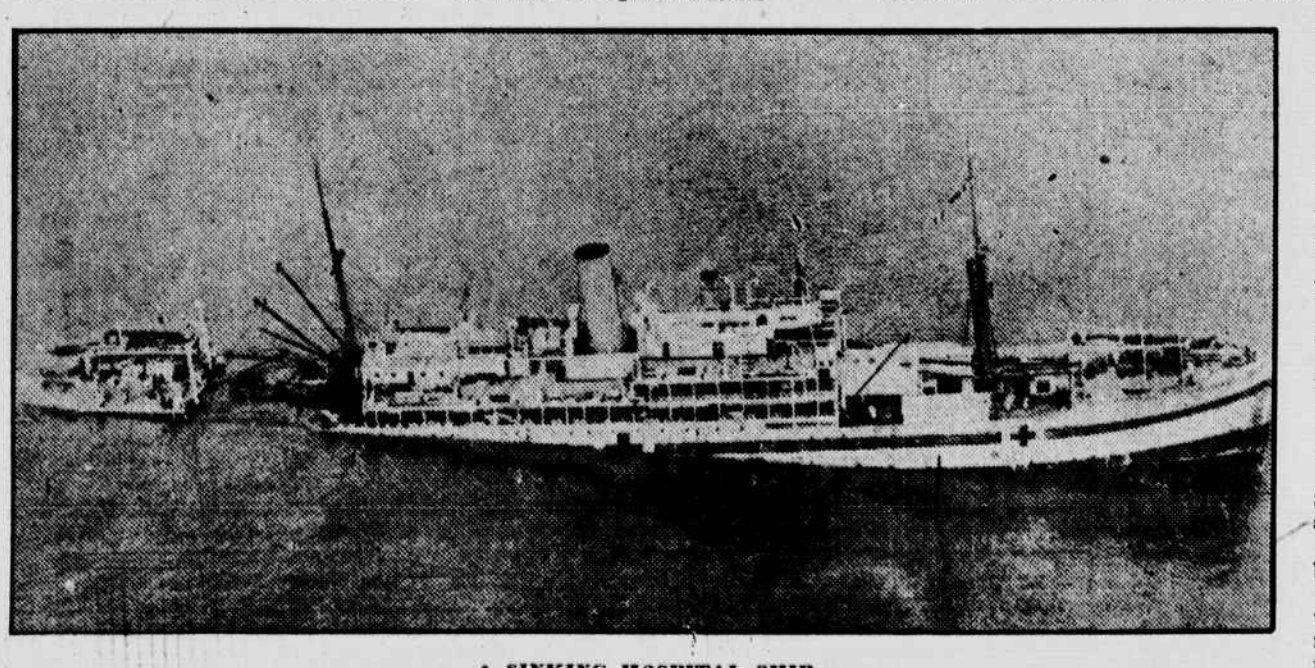
Devonport Commander-in-Chief to Conyngham: Proceed in execution admiralty orders, Acbates having relieved you. Submarine activity in lat. 48-41, long. 4-51.

The Aubrietia had already given warning of the danger referred to in the last words of this final message. It had been flashing the news in this way:

1:15 p.m. Aubrietia to Conyngham: Submarine sighted 40-30 N 6-8. Sighted submarine on surface. Speed is not enough. Course southwest by south magnetic.

1:30 p.m. Conyngham to Acbates: Aubretia to all men-of-war and Land's End. Chasing submarine on the surface 49-30 N 6-8 W; course southwest by south. Waiting to get into range. He is going faster than I can.

2 p.m. Aubrietia to all men of war: Submarine submerged 49-20 N 06-12. Still searching.



A SINKING HOSPITAL SHIP.
The ship contained hundred of wounded men, besides scores of nurses.

The fact that nothing more was seen of that submarine may possibly detract from the thrill of the experience, but in describing the operations of this convoy I am not attempting to tell a story of wild adventure, but merely to set forth what happened ninety-nine out of a hundred times. What made destroyer work so exasperating was that, in the majority of cases, the option of fighting or not fighting lay with the submarine. Had the submarine decided to approach and attack the convoy the chances would have been more than even that it would have been destroyed. In accordance with its usual practice, however, it chose to submerge, and that decision ended the affair for the moment.

This was the way in which merchant ships were protected. At the time this submarine was sighted it was headed directly for this splendid aggregation of cargo vessels; had not the Aubrietia discovered it and had not one of the American destroyers started in pursuit, the U-boat would have made an attack and possibly would have sent one or more ships to the bottom. The chief business of the escorting ships, all through the war, was this unspectacular one of chasing the submarines away; and for every underwater vessel actually destroyed there were hundreds of experiences such as the one which I have just described.

The rest of this trip was uneventful. Two American destroyers escorted H. M. S. Cumberland—the ocean escort which had accompanied the convoy from Sydney—to Devonport; the rest of the American escort took its quota of merchantmen into Brest, and from that point sailed back to Queenstown, whence, after three or four days in port, it went out with another convoy. This was the routine which was repeated until the end of the war.

The OU-17 and the HS-14 form an illustration of convoys which made their trips successfully. Yet these same destroyers had another experience which pictures other phases of the convoy system.

On the morning of October 19, Commander Johnson's division was escorting a great convoy of British ships on its way to the east coast of England. Suddenly out of the air came one of those calls which were daily occurrences in the submarine zone. The J. L. Luckenback signaled that she was ninety miles ahead of the convoy and was being shelled by a submarine. In a few minutes the Nicholson, one of the destroyers of the escort, started to the rescue. For the next few hours our ships began to pick out of the air the messages which detailed the progress of this adventure—messages which tell the story so graphically and which are so typical of the events which were constantly taking place in those waters, that I reproduce them verbatim:

8:50 a.m. S.O.S. J. L. Luckenback being gunned by submarine. Position 48.08 N., 9.31 W.

9:25 Conyngham to Nicholson: Proceed to assistance of S.O.S. ship.

9:30 Luckenback to U. S. A.: Am maneuvering around.

9:30. Luckenback to U. S. A.: How far are you away?

9:40. Luckenback to U. S. A.: Code books thrown overboard. How soon will you arrive?

Nicholson to Luckenback: In two hours.

9:41. Luckenback to U. S. A.: Look for boats. They are shelling us.

Nicholson to Luckenback: Do not surrender!

Luckenbach to Nicholson: Never.

10:01. Nicholson to Luckenback: Course south magnetic.

12:36 p.m. Nicholson to Conyngham: Submarine submerged 47.47 N., 10.00 W. at 11:20.

1:23. Conyngham to Nicholson: What became of steamer?

3:41. Nicholson to admiral (at Queenstown) and Conyngham: Luckenback now joining convoy. Should be able to make port unassisted.

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I have already said that a great part of the destroyer's duty was to rescue merchantmen that were being attacked by submarines; this Luckenback incident vividly illustrates this point. Had the submarine used its torpedo upon this vessel it probably could have disposed of it summarily, but it was the part of wisdom for the submarine to economize in these weapons, because

(Continued on Sixth Page.)